DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 667 CG 023 641

AUTHOR Monroe, Catherine S.; Newlon, Betty J.
TITLE The Tilted Family: Its Effects on Mothers.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 33p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Daughters; *Family Structure; *Mothers; *Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Role; *Satisfaction
IDENTIFIERS Geometric Family; *Tilted Family

ABSTRACT

Family constellation theory focuses on the idea that the composition of a family determines to a certain degree the behavior of the individual members. An important missing piece in family constellation theory, however, is the possible impact children have on their parents. With smaller families the current trend, there is a greater likelihood of being in a family with same-sex children. Using family constellation theory as background, this study explored the hypothesis that there are effects on a mother who has no daughter (tilted) that are different from a mother who has both a son and a daughter (geometric). Mothers (N=36), including 16 tilted and 20 geometric mothers, were surveyed using the Mother's Questionnaire to discover potential differences in four areas of family functioning: feelings of loss; socialization; mother's isolation; and uniqueness of family structure. The findings indicated that titled mothers experienced a feeling of loss for not having children of both genders, experienced some isolation from being the only female, and described the advantages of their families differently from the geometric mothers. The more persons in families are valued for their uniqueness and individuality with decreased emphasis on gender expectations, the less isolated particular members will be, and the less likelihood of any titling effects will there be. (ABL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED336667

The Tilted Family: Its Effects on Mothers

Catherine S. Monroe

Betty J. Newlon

Counseling and Guidance

The University of Arizona

Tucson, AZ 85721

CG023641

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Betty J. Newlon
Catherine S. Monroe

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract

With smaller families now being the trend, there is greater likelihood of being in a family with same-sex children. Using family constellation theory as background, this paper explores the hypothesis that there are effects on a mother who has no daughter (tilted) that are different from the effects on a mother who has both a son and a daughter (geometric). Thirty-six mothers, 16 tilted and 20 geometric, were surveyed using the Mother's Questionnaire to discover potential differences in four areas of family functioning: feelings of loss, socialization, mother's isolation, and uniqueness of family structure. The findings indicate tilted mothers experience a feeling of loss for not having children of both genders, experience some isolation from being the only female, and describe the advantages and disadvantages of their families differently from the geometric mothers.

We will raise a family
A boy for you, A girl for me,
Oh, can't you see
How happy we would be? (Caesar, 1924)

Recently in the United States, there has been an increase in the number of couples who expect to have only two children. Women averaged about two children in 1980 versus three in 1950 (Gibson & Fast, 1986). There is also evidence to show that "a majority of couples want children of each sex. Presumably, this is because boys and girls play different roles in the family apart from any economic considerations" (Freedman, Freedman, & Whelpton, 1960, p. 142). In earlier times when larger families were the norm, the chances of having children of both sexes were high. With the recent trend of decreasing family size, the chances of having children of both sexes has decreased (Falconer & Ross, 1987).

Family constellation theory, the idea that the composition of a family determines to a certain degree the behavior of the individual members, has received much attention (Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1956; Toman, 1976; Hoopes & Harper, 1987; Leman, 1985). Much of family constellation theory focuses on one's sibling position as it affects one's personality development and behavior (Toman, 1976). Bank and Kahn (1975)

reported that sibling relationships were important, powerful, and often overlooked, forces in understanding family dynamics. There also has been research on one's sibling position and that of one's spouse: complementary versus non-complementary pairings (Toman, 1976; Hoopes & Harper, 1987; Leman, 1984). Another area has studied the relationship between parent and child: asserting the quality of the relationship is partly dependent upon the degree of complementarity of the sibling positions of the parent and child (Toman, 1976; Hoopes & Harper, 1987; Leman, 1985).

An important missing piece in family constellation theory, however, is the possible impact children have on their parents. One such area, the focus of this particular study, involves families in which children are the same gender. Falconer and Ross (1987) have named this "the tilted family" (p. 649). They argue that a family which is tilted has unique developmental issues that effect its functioning, especially felt by the parent who has no children of his/her own gender.

The purpose of this study was to examine the possible effects on mothers who have sons only, by

comparing a group of these mothers with a group of mothers who have a son and a daughter.

Questions for Consideration

Based on Falconer and Ross' observations (1987) there are four specific issues relating to family functioning that were examined in this study. The specific issues examined were:

1) A sense of loss, with potential feelings of guilt and failure. The majority of couples want a child of each sex (Freedman, Freedman, & Whelpton, 1960). When this happens the couples express feelings of being complete or lucky, and see no reason to expand their family (Polit-O'Hara & Berman, 1984). When couples hope or expect to have a child of each sex, and this does not happen, the hypothesis is that they then have to deal, in some way, with their loss (Falconer & Ross, 1987). How do couples express or deal with this lost expectation?

2) Problems in socialization and role behavior within the family. Female children are more likely than males to be involved with and support family norms by carrying out household chores, staying close to mother and helping her, and caring for younger siblings.

Indeed, according to a recent Nova production (1983), parents hold expectations for their offspring based solely on gender from the moment of birth. Despite biological realities, 20 years of feminism, and experiments in non-sexist child-rearing, these gender stereotypes persist, and parents act significantly different with their newborn sons than with their daughters based on the gender expectations they hold. What adjustments are made in a tilted family, where there is no daughter to identify with mother and the female role, nor carry out the functions that a daughter performs in a geometric family? Does mother do all the tasks that have been identified as "women's work", or is there a more egalitarian sharing of tasks, either out of recognition that it's too much for one person, or that it's not "women's work" but family work? And with whom does mother identify most?

3) Potential isolation for a mother who does not have a child of her own gender. According to Falconer and Ross (1987),

> Mother may become isolated and more uncertain of who she is or how she should behave....Gender confusion may develop....Wishes for opposite-sexed

children are often projected, displaced or denied (p. 651).

A mother may seek balance by looking outside her family for her "little girl", in a niece, neighbor, her own mother, or other female friends (Falconer & Ross, 1987). What is it like to be a female in an otherwise all-male world?

4) A sense of uniqueness of this family structure. Clearly, couples' expectations are that they will have children of each sex (Freedman, et al., 1960). How does a family which doesn't fit the expectations of "a boy for you, a girl for me", view itself?

Procedures

Sample

The population for this study were mothers from nuclear families consisting of the subject and her husband plus their two children who were between the ages of 6-18 years, and resided with both parents at home. One-half of the subjects were mothers of a son and a daughter (geometric), and one-half were mothers of two sons (tilted). The subjects were recruited through an initial letter sent home with students attending elementary schools in the Southwest.

After receiving the names of participants, a copy of a self-report inventory was sent to each volunteer, with a self-addressed, stamped envelope in which to return the completed inventory. The participants returned the questionnaire upon completion.

Instrument

The Mother's Questionnaire (MQ). A four-part self-report inventory designed especially for this study. The mothers were requested to answer all items. Estimated time to complete all items was one-half hour. Space was given for any additional comments or questions that participants might have.

The four parts of the MQ are outlined as follows:

Part I. General Information

This was a brief section designed to gather demographic information about the participants including age; length of marriage; age and gender of each child; and employment information.

Part II. Family Statements

This section consisted of 23 statements about families to which the participants responded in a five-point standard Likert format; possible choices ranged

from 'not at all' to 'extremely' in terms of "how you feel about the statement."

These 23 statements were divided into three scales, representing three of the four research questions.

1) A sense of loss, 2) Problems with socialization and role behavior, and 3) Isolation of the parent who has no child of his/her gender.

Part III. Hypothetical Situations

This section consisted of two possible situations occurring in family life; respondents were to give the answer "that best fits you." Situation #1 dealt with two of the research questions (possible isolation of the mother and socialization/role behavior). Situation #2 dealt specifically with socialization and role behavior. In both questions there were five possible responses, one being "other", giving a participant the chance to personalize her answer.

Part IV. Unstructured Responses

This section contained open-ended statements. The three statements were concerned with the sense of uniqueness in the tilted family, and asked participants

to list 1) advantages, and 2) disadvantages of a family like yours, and 3) describe the "ideal" family.

Methods of Analysis

The purpose of collecting data on tilted versus geometric mothers in this exploratory study was to determine if there were differences between these two groups on a number of variables that can be measured, and if so, to determine the degree of correlation between these variables.

In order to analyze the four research questions of this study, the following statistical procedures were used. Range, means, frequencies and percentages were used to analyze the demographic information. Cronbach's coefficient alphas were performed to measure the internal consistency of the Family Statement Scale items. The t-test was used to provide statistical information as to whether the difference between the means groups was significant or based on chance. Additionally, unstructured participant responses in sections III and IV of the MQ were categorized and discussed.

Results

The issues for consideration in this research were based on Falconer and Ross' (1987) hypothesis that several different areas of family functioning would be affected if the children were same-gender versus mixed-gender, and that the effects would be felt most by the mother of sons or the father of daughters. Four issues were identified as representing potential constructs relating to the tilted family and are as follows:

1. A sense of loss, with potential feelings of guilt and failure (LOSS).
2. Problems in socialization and role behavior within the family (ROLE).
3. Potential isolation for a mother who does not have a child of her own gender (ISOL).
4. A sense of uniqueness of this family structure (UNIQ).

This study consisted of a total of 36 female subjects, 20 of whom were mothers of a son and a daughter (geometric) and 16 of whom were mothers of two sons (tilted). In all cases the children of these mothers were between the ages of 6-18 years, thus attending school full-time, and were living at home.

In addition, the children's fathers also resided in the home. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of subjects with appropriate demographic information having been obtained from the General Information section of the Mother's Questionnaire. The means of the two groups of women were very similar for age, length of marriage, ages of children and similarities for length of employment and age of youngest child when mother returned to work.

Place Table 1 about here

Analysis of the Constructs

The Family Statements section of the Mother's Questionnaire was comprised of 23 items that were designed to assess differences in three of the issues (LOSS, ROLE, ISOL) considered in the research.

Initially, coefficient "alphas" were computed on the three scales comprising the Family Statements as a measure of internal consistency reliability (Miller, 1986) (Table 2).

Place Table 2 about here

Next, t-tests were computed on the Family Statement items by scales (Table 3). The t-test for the Loss scale was significant at the .002 level. The Loss scale had a coefficient alpha of .533, suggesting only a moderate relationship between the six items comprising that scale; yet the scale was significant at the .002 level, suggesting a higher or different degree of interrelationship than was explained by the reliability measure. The significant findings for the Loss scale, even with its moderate internal consistency, appeared to confirm what some of the writers had suggested: that parents have expectations regarding a balance of gender in their children, experience disappointment when this doesn't happen, and at least consider having another child as a way to achieve balance in the family.

The remaining scales (ROLE, ISOL) did not demonstrate significance. The internal consistency of these scales was moderate (ROLE = .451, ISOL = .614): thus it was less clear what domain was being sampled,

and the responses of the two groups of mothers were not different enough to be significant.

Place Table 3 about here

Cross tabulations were performed on Family Statements 1 and 2 to determine whether a gender-bias existed: i.e. would a geometric mother state that it was her daughter who would be "a lot like me" regardless of birth order? And if a gender bias exists for the geometric mother, on what basis does the tilted mother decide who is "a lot like me"?

Place Table 4 about here

The cross tabulation data, shown in Table 4, was interesting. Responses labeled "not at all" or "a little" were grouped together at the lower end, and responses labeled "quite a bit" or "extremely" were grouped together at the higher end; "moderate" responses were not included in the tabulation. Whereas both geometric and tilted mothers in this sample stated that oldest sons were "a lot like me" far more

frequently than "not like me", mothers in both groups were equally likely to give a low response or a high response when considering younger sons, or daughters in either birth position. The statements taken together offered a unique opportunity to test for gender bias in the sample populations; from the cross tabulations it was obvious that a gender bias did not exist as hypothesized, and it was found that a mother would most likely select an oldest son as being "most like me."

Unstructured Responses

In section III (hypothetical situations) of the Mother's Questionnaire and section IV (advantages and disadvantages of having a family like yours, and the "ideal" family) the items called for unstructured responses from the participants. These responses were classified into appropriate categories or themes and the results are discussed below.

Section III contained two hypothetical situations in family life related to socialization. Participants were asked to "circle the answer that best fits you." Situation #1 required the participant to decide where to take the family, to a ballet or football game. Responses show somewhat different distributions for the

two groups (Table 5). The most common choice and perhaps the easiest resolution for either group was #4 "football one day, ballet another day", chosen by 50% of tilted and 60% of geometric mothers. Other responses implied choices were influenced by gender and family composition. Three tilted mothers (19%) chose #2 "we all go to the football game"; none of the geometric mothers chose this. Does the tilted mother feel she has fewer options? Does she "go along" with the males because it's easier simply because "male" activities have become a family norm? Seven of the geometric mothers (35%) chose #3 "some go to ballet, some to football game"; none of the tilted mothers chose this. Although one has to guess who would go to each activity, it could be assumed to divide along gender lines; in any case the mother feels that she would have someone to accompany her. This idea is strengthened by considering those responses in the #5 "other" category. Three of the tilted mothers (19%) choosing "other" stated, "I would go to ballet, they would go to football game", indicating they (the mothers) would not have someone to accompany them and may be an indication of some degree of isolation of the

tilted mother. Another tilted mother added, "we vote" in the "other" category (one can only guess what the outcome of such a vote would be).

Place Table 5 about here

Situation 2 asked the participant to decide which family member(s) would do the laundry in a particular situation. Responses showed fairly similar distribution between the two groups of women (Table 5). This may indicate that completion of some household chores, e.g. laundry, are similar for both geometric and tilted mothers.

Section IV in the Mother's Questionnaire consisted of 4 items. Three items were concerned with the issue of the uniqueness of the tilted family, i.e. how the tilted family viewed itself compared with the geometric family. Item 1 asked participants to "list some advantages of having a family like yours." Item 2 asked participants to "list some disadvantages of having a family like yours." Item 3 asked participants to "describe what the ideal family would be like."

Some guidelines used in categorizing the responses included the following: more than one different response from the same participant would be counted in different categories; however, if a participant made more than one statement in the same category it would count as one. Generally, each participant offered at least one response that fit a category. The response, "none" was reported only when a participant responded that way (as in "no disadvantages").

Place Table 6 about here

Table 6 shows the categories of responses for the geometric mothers, who agreed strongly in their responses and their responses fell in fewer different categories. Most of their responses fit in categories involving gender and interpersonal relationships. The responses of tilted mothers (Table 7), on the other hand, were more varied, with less agreement, and appeared to have a functional quality about them quite different from the gender and relational quality of the geometric mothers' responses.

Place Table 7 about here

Summary, Discussion and Recommendations

Research into family life and one's perceptions of the family is complex and not easily understood. The influences impinging on the families and individuals within those families are many, varied and elusive. Each family is as unique as the individuals comprising it plus the various experiences that have occurred during the family's life which have helped steer the family on its present course. Based on an hypothesis formulated by Falconer and Ross (1987) this research pursued one area of relevance to family life that had not been studied previously; effects on the mother in a family which has sons only (tilted). Falconer and Ross observed in their clinical practice that a mother of sons only would be affected by this family constellation in different ways than a mother in a geometric family (son and daughter). This exploratory study looked for differences between women from tilted and geometric families.

Based on t-test analysis of the data there was significance at the .002 level for the Loss scale which explored women's expectation of their children's genders and their sense of loss when the expected did not become reality. Thus, there was some evidence shown for measurable differences between the two groups of women on the issue of loss.

There was no significance found in the items which measured socialization. Three possible reasons for the lack of significance were: 1) the low inter-item correlation (.451), 2) the lack of specificity of the items which decreased the likelihood of different responses for the two groups of mothers, and 3) the incredibly complex nature of a domain dealing with socialization and roles in a family.

One of the more interesting findings from this research resulted from an attempt to determine the presence of a gender bias in how geometric mothers would decide if one child or the other (or both) was " a lot like me." Cross tabulation data for the responses to the statements by geometric and tilted mothers revealed that not only was there no gender bias for her female child, but that both groups of mothers

showed a clear preference to identify with an oldest son but not oldest or youngest daughter or youngest son.

This information was not central to this study; nevertheless, it raised some interesting questions. Do mothers form stronger attachments to oldest sons than any other child in the family constellation? How is this data interpreted in terms of family constellation theory which hypothesized a parent will identify most strongly with the child who occupies a birth position similar to their own (Toman, 1968; Leman, 1985)? No birth order information was collected on the participants, so there is no way to know what percentage of "oldest children" existed within the subject population. However, it could be assumed that the population contained a normal distribution of various birth orders. Thus the strong preference for mothers to identify with the oldest male child warrants further investigation.

Some interesting responses were obtained by asking the two groups of mothers to list advantages and disadvantages of "being in a family like yours" (Tables 6 & 7). What appeared as advantages for one group were

disadvantages for the other group, and vice-versa. Is it merely the grass is greener on the other side of the fence? What one doesn't have looks better by comparison?

Advantages in the tilted family, to the extent that one can generalize, were functional in nature, whereas in the geometric family the advantages seemed connected to gender and interrelationships. Parents' expectations for their child's gender do make a difference. Otherwise, there wouldn't be such different responses from the two groups of mothers. If parents had similar expectations for each gender child, there could be instead a focus on each child's uniqueness. The fact that 13 out of 20 geometric mothers stated as an advantage "We get to experience raising a child of each gender", indicates that parents, and society in general, expect the genders to be different, and it is a plus to be able to observe and experience both. On the other hand, it is a negative not to be able to experience both genders, whatever the reality may be, (e.g. the tilted mother who feels she's missing out because daughters are

supposed to be closer to their mothers as adults than sons).

These findings reflect the ideas of Block and Block (NOVA, 1983) regarding the persistence of stereotypes in our society for child rearing, despite all the sociological changes over the past 20 years. It appears that parents hold expectations (learned from the society's expectations) for each gender child; because the expectations are different for each it follows that parents also expect or want to have one of each gender. When this doesn't happen a sense of loss can occur, and the mother isolated (in the all-male household). This is partly due to focusing on the supposed differences that separate the genders rather than on the uniqueness that each child brings to a family. The more persons in families are valued for their uniqueness and individuality with decreased emphasis on gender expectations, the less isolated particular members will be, and the less likely will there be any tilting effects.

References

Ansbacher, H. L. & Ansbacher, R. R. (1956). The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler. New York: Basic Books.

Bank, S. & Kahn, M. D. (1975). Sisterhood-Brotherhood is powerful: Sibling sub-systems and family therapy. Family Process. 14, 3, 311-337.

Caesar, I. (1924). "Tea for Two". Music by Vincent Youmans. Los Angeles: Warner Bros.

Falconer, C. W. & Ross, C. A. (1986). The tilted family. Canadian Journal of Psychiatry 31, 7,649-652.

Freedman, D. S., Freedman, R. & Whelpton, P. K. (1960). Size of family and preference for children of each sex. American Journal of Sociology. 66, 141-146.

Gibson, A. & Fast, T. (1986). The Women's Atlas of the United States. Facts on File Publications: New York. 101.

Hoopes, M. M., & Harper, J. M. (1987). Birth Order Roles and Sibling Patterns in Individual and Family Therapy. Rockville, MD: Aspen Publishers, Inc.

Leman, K. (1985). The Birth Order Book. Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company.

Miller, B. C. (1986). Family Research Methods. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

NOVA (1983). A boy for you, a girl for me. WGBH Boston: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company. 78-81.

Polit-O'Hara, D., & Berman, J. (1984). Just The Right Size. New York: Praeger Publishers.

Toman, W. (1976). Family Constellation: Its Effects on Personality and Social Behavior. 3rd Edition. New York: Springer Publishing Co.

Table 1. Distribution of Mothers' demographic information.

Item	Tilted Mothers (n=16)	Geometric Mothers (n=20)
Ages		
Range	33 - 45	31 - 51
Mean	37.56	38.70
Length of Marriage		
Range	9 - 20	10 - 21
Mean	15.06	14.95
Age of Oldest Child		
Range	8 - 14	8 - 18
Mean	10.87	11.60
Age of Youngest Child		
Range	6 - 12	6 - 12
Mean	7.68	7.80
Length of Employment		
Range	1 - 20	1 - 16
Mean	6.69	6.79
Age of Youngest child when returned to work		
Range	0 - 8	0 - 6
Mean	3.29	2.66

Table 2. Coefficient "alphas" for the scales: Loss, socialization/ roles, and isolation.

Scale	Coefficient "alphas"
Loss	.533
Roles	.451
Isolation	.614

Table 3. T-tests showing mean scores, standard deviations and significance levels for scales: Loss, socialization/roles, and isolation.

	Tilted Mothers (n=16)		Geometric Mothers (n=20)			
Scale	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	t	p
Loss	16.31	4.7	12.3	2.3	3.32	.002
Socialization/Roles	27.56	4.0	26.90	3.7	.52	.608
Isolation	25.88	6.0	27.90	5.1	-1.10	.281

Table 4. Distribution of responses and percentages of family and gender statements.

Item	Tilted Mothers				Geometric Mothers			
	Not at all or a little		Quite a bit or extremely		Not at all or a little		Quite a bit or extremely	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
I was disappointed because of the sex of my second child	8	50	8	50	20	100	-	-
My oldest child is a lot like me								
Child's gender female	-	-	-	-	2	25	3	38
Child's gender male	2	10	9	56	1	13	8	67
My youngest child is a lot like me								
Child's gender female	-	-	-	-	5	42	5	42
Child's gender male	6	38	8	50	2	25	2	25

Table 5. Distribution of responses and percentages to hypothetical family decision situations.

Situation	Tilted Mothers		Geometric Mothers	
	N	%	N	%
I want to take the family to the ballet. Husband want to take the family to football game. We resolve this in the following way:				
Ballet/all	-	-	-	-
Football/all	3	19	-	-
Some ballet/some football	-	-	7	35
Football one day/ ballet another day	8	50	12	60
Other	5	31	1	5
I've done 8 loads of laundry. My husband has just returned from camping with more laundry. We resolve this in the following way:				
I do the laundry	6	38	6	30
Help from one child	2	12	2	10
My husband does it	1	6	2	10
We divide the work	6	38	8	40
Other	1	6	2	10

Table 6. Geometric mothers' responses to open-ended items.

Item	Number
List some advantages to having a family like yours.	
parents experience raising a child of each gender	13
children experience a sibling of opposite sex	2
same-gender parent/child relationships	3
opposite-gender parent/child relationships	2
clothing kids fun - some frills/ some not	1
help with housework from daughter	1
friends/play companions	1
List some disadvantages of having a family like yours.	
2 of same sex would be best for them - better friends	4
hand-me-downs don't work	2
it would possibly save time to have same-gender (e.g. same activities)	1
older daughter "mothers" younger brother	1
too hard to find time for myself- too much housework	1
fighting	3
problems having friends of each at same time (e.g. for slumber party)	1
none	7

Table 7. Tilted mothers' responses to openended-items.

Item	Number
List some advantages to having a family like yours.	
children share similar interests, behaviors, sports	5
being the only female is special	4
father is more involved because of male children	3
hand-me-down clothing and toys	2
the boys are good buddies, play well together	2
mother has more free time because the males go out together	1
little brother looks up to big brother	1
carry on the family name	1
no worry about a daughter getting pregnant	1
family constellation similar to parents' family of origin	1
easy to have friend of both over at the same time	1
List some disadvantages of having a family like yours.	
no other female companionship	9
too much housework (seen as women's work)	3
2 boys most rowdy combination	2
boys don't get to experience a sister	2
would have enjoyed experiencing a daughter	1
none	2